

Thabo Mbeki's Bible:

the role of the religion in the South African public realm after liberation

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Introduction

Since its arrival in Southern Africa, the Bible has been a site of struggle (West 2007), though often in more complex ways that most postcolonial analysis has acknowledged. This article reflects on some of that history but focuses on the present, examining the place of the Bible in public discourse in South Africa, more than a decade after liberation.

More than a decade and a half before liberation, in one of the bleakest periods of the liberation struggle, the South African Black theologian Takatso Mofokeng emphasised the contested nature of the Bible. Against a backdrop during the 1970s of Black Theology's predominantly positive appropriation of the Bible, Mofokeng insisted that there are numerous "texts, stories and traditions in the Bible which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature." What is more, he continues, any attempt "to 'save' or 'co-opt' these oppressive texts for the oppressed only serve the interests of the oppressors" (Mofokeng 1988:37-38). While Black theologians may not have recognised this reality, Mofokeng argues, ordinary organised young black South Africans, "have categorically identified the Bible as an oppressive document by its very nature and to its very core" and have argued that the best option "is to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible." Indeed, says Mofokeng, some "have zealously campaigned for its expulsion from the oppressed Black community" (Mofokeng 1988:40).¹

But, as Mofokeng immediately goes on to acknowledge, this campaign for the Bible's expulsion from the liberation struggle was met with little support (Mofokeng 1988:40). The reason, Mofokeng claims, is

1 My colleague Tahir Sitito explained to me that one of the ways in which young black South Africans 'expelled' the Bible was to convert to Islam. He referred me to the work of Ebrahim Moosa, who argues: "For the black underclasses whose wretched experience of life was ostensibly sanctioned by Christianity, Islam was an attractive alternative" (Moosa 1995:152).

largely due to the fact that no easily accessible ideological silo or storeroom is being offered to the social classes of our people that are desperately in need of liberation. African traditional religions are too far behind most blacks while Marxism, is to my mind, far ahead of many blacks, especially adult people. In the absence of a better storeroom of ideological and spiritual food, the Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an undeterminable period of time to be the haven of the Black masses par excellence (Mofokeng 1988:40).

Consequently, in the 1980s, Mofokeng and other Black theologians “who are committed to the struggle for liberation and are organically connected to the struggling Christian people, have chosen to honestly do their best to shape the Bible into a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people” (Mofokeng 1988:40).

But what of our current moment? Having played an important role in the liberation struggle, where it was constantly centre-stage within the public realm, what is the place of the Bible nearly a decade and a half after liberation? Although acknowledging that the Bible does have some substantive value for liberation and life, the overall thrust of Mofokeng’s argument is that the Bible’s primary value lies in its accessibility to ordinary African Christians. In other words, the Bible’s minimal intrinsic value becomes significant for pragmatic reasons – it is accessible. The implication of Mofokeng’s argument, however, is that there may be other silos which have more intrinsic value (though they may be less pragmatically accessible). The two alternative silos he identifies are African (Traditional) Religion and Marxism. The former, he claims, is “too far behind most blacks” while Marxism is, in his opinion “far ahead of many blacks, especially adult people” (Mofokeng 1988:40). While Mofokeng clearly implies that these silos have more to offer than the Bible, both are inaccessible, though for different reasons.

While I am not sure quite what Mofokeng means by “behind” and “ahead”, his spatial language suggests a sense of progression, in that while most ordinary African Christians had (in the 1980s) moved on from African (Traditional) Religions to the Bible (via forms of African Christianity), they had not yet moved on from the Bible to Marxism. It was a common (mis)conception in the 1980s, particularly within South African Black Theology and Contextual Theology, that African (Traditional) Religion (ATR) and African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated Churches (AICs) did not have a sufficiently socio-political orientation and analysis, focussing more on religio-cultural concerns (de Gruchy 1985, 1985; Chikane 1985; Tlhagale 1985). During the 1980s and into the 1990s a more nuanced

understanding of ATR and AICs developed (Petersen 1995; Maluleke 1998), and it could be argued that there has been something of a re-appropriation of this silo within Black Theology and Contextual Theology.

However, while there has been a reevaluation of ATR and AICs within Black Theology since the 1990s, Black theologian Tinyiko Maluleke concludes his discussion of this silo by saying that he doubts whether “pragmatic and moral arguments can be constructed in a manner that will speak to the masses without having to deal with the Bible in the process of such constructions” (Maluleke 1996:14).

Similarly, though there was a sustained and incisive attempt to infuse Black Theology and Contextual Theology with Marxist analysis (Frostin 1988; Mosala 1989), it never took hold among the religious masses. Though the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and even the African National Congress (ANC) have kept Marxist categories and concepts alive,² it can reasonably confidentially be concluded that Marxism has not become a serious option as a silo for the masses. More than a decade into liberation, the vast majority of South Africans still turn to the Bible for sustenance and continue to base their ideological and spiritual positions on the Bible.

In sum, not much has changed with respect to Mofokeng’s analysis, though we would want to nuance it. The real change, however, after liberation, is that the Bible no longer occupies the same kind of place in the public realm in South Africa.

Religion in the public realm

Indeed, religion in general has receded to the private sphere. Part of the impetus has been self-imposed. Having partially provided the platform for resistance to apartheid while the liberation movements were banned, religious institutions have readily conceded this territory to the liberation movements and political parties, since shortly before the year of our liberation in 1994. Another aspect of this retreat has been driven by our secular state (or, more accurately, religion-neutral state) and Constitution. The effect on prophetic religion has been substantial, and in this section I will briefly reflect on this shift, focussing on Christianity, the religion I am most familiar with.

2 In most of Thabo Mbeki’s public speeches, for example, he contends for an ANC interpretation and appropriation of Marxist discourse, even when he is critical of those in the alliance who are more overtly socialist.

The *Kairos Document* is an illuminating example of where we find ourselves today. The product of theological activism and reflection in the wake of the 1985 State of Emergency, *The Kairos Document* “came straight out of the flames of the townships in 1985”, in the words of Albert Nolan (Nolan 1994:213). In the words of *The Kairos Document* itself,

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations and there is every indication that the crisis has only just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come. It is the KAIROS or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church (theologians 1986:4).

With profoundly insightful and deeply controversial analysis (van der Water 2001), *The Kairos Document* identified three kinds of theology in South African Christianity. The bold assertion that there was more than one theology was in itself a massive contribution, changing forever how South Africans (and others) have viewed Christianity. The characterisation of these three kinds of theology took the analysis further and marks *The Kairos Document* as one of the most profound theological statements to emerge from Christian sectors in South Africa’s long history of engagement with Christianity.

The Kairos Document named these three theologies as follows: State Theology, Church Theology, and Prophetic Theology. Briefly, “State Theology” is the theology of the South African apartheid State (and its church-based substantiation) which “is simply the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy” (theologians 1986:3). “Church Theology” is in a limited, guarded and cautious way critical of apartheid. “Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation” (theologians 1986:9). *The Kairos Document* advocates for a “Prophetic Theology”, a theology which “speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand” (theologians 1986:18).

What *The Kairos Document* referred to as “State Theology” (the theology of the apartheid state) is gratefully gone. Our state is resolutely religion neutral and the Constitution, not the Bible, is its inspired text. “Prophetic Theology” has diminished, with many of its practitioners now in government or parastatal structures, implementing the policy of the African National Congress (ANC) led alliance (which includes the Confederation of South

African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP)) under the guidance of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. “Church Theology”, however, is on the upsurge. The space created by the demise of State Theology and the diminishing of Prophetic Theology has been filled by new forms of Church Theology. Church Theology is best characterised in my view by what Walter Brueggemann describes as a theology of “consolidation which is situated among the established and secure and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who faithfully abides and sustains on behalf of the present ordering” (Brueggemann 1993:202).

Ironically, our liberation movement-led democratic government, which includes large numbers of theologians who drafted or supported *The Kairos Document*, exerts considerable pressure on the religious sector to stay within the confines of Church-type theology. In the public sphere religion is deployed to deal with matters of morality, narrowly defined. So crime, corruption, and condoms are its terrain, not macro-economic policy.

Civil society too seems content to see religion almost exclusively within the ambit of Church-type theology. Celebrating the demise of State Theology and its hold on civil society, civil society is embarrassed by religion and so has relegated religion to the margins of public discourse. Though not surprising, given the evils of Christian National Education and other heresies, the bracketing of religion in a thoroughly religious society like South Africa simply compounds the problem, relegating it to the sphere of Church-type theology.

Even the academic sector is feeling the pressure of the pull of Church Theology. There are growing indications that the churches, particularly the Dutch Reformed churches, are wanting to reassert their control over those university departments that have traditionally served their constituency. This is accompanied by talk of a new reformation in the corridors of these more confessional academic departments, signalling a return to a piety-centred Church Theology.

Obviously, it is not only these sectors that prefer the current predilection for Church Theology. Conservative forces in the churches are revelling in the space that an unlikely consensus over the preference for Church Theology is providing. Church leaders who were vocal proponents of Church (and even State) Theology in the 1980s now share platforms with government officials, and there appears to be a consensus within the institutional church (and other religious institutions) that morality is *the* terrain of religion.

Just as *The Kairos Document* was a sign of its times, so the passing of its 20th anniversary in

2006 with little notice is a sign of these times. South African society in general, it would seem, has settled for a benign, cloistered and constrained form of Christianity. Indeed, the recent religious contribution to the same-sex marriage debate and the cross-religions alliances that were formed to combat the change in legislation is a clear indication that Church Theology-type religion is in the ascendancy.³

What *The Kairos Document* itself got wrong was its analysis about *the Bible* and its conclusion that “It hardly needs saying that this kind of faith and this [Church Theology] type of spirituality has no biblical foundation” (theologians 1986:16). Unfortunately, Church Theology does in fact have a substantial biblical foundation. This was the very argument of Takatso Mofokeng and his Black theologian compatriot Itumeleng Mosala (Mosala 1989), one that *The Kairos Document* failed to grasp (to our current cost). Indeed, what characterises our current moment, particularly within the public realm, is that we have been left with an uncontested notion that the Bible is both about and the exclusive property of Church Theology. Even our State President, Thabo Mbeki, seems to be taking up the Bible for Church Theology-type projects.

Mbeki’s Bible

The tendency of left-leaning, ex-prophetic theologians to abandon the Bible in our current post-liberation context is understandable but dangerous. Church Theology is regaining its ground at a rapid rate; having been on the defensive in the period immediately after liberation, it has now regrouped, especially as it has been granted more or less uncontested access to the Bible -- the silo of the masses.

Thabo Mbeki, the South African President, has come to recognise, I will argue in this section, that the Bible remains a significant text in the South African context, and has chosen, therefore, to harness its resources, attempting both to coopt this silo of the masses and increasingly to deploy it in addressing the moral fibre of South African public life. While Mbeki has always been fond of and adept at using ‘classic’ literature in his speeches, ranging from local African poetry to Shakespeare, he has increasingly cited the Bible, recognising perhaps that the masses are more likely to connect with the Bible than almost any other

3 But Prophetic Theology is not dead. Indeed, there are clear signs that the struggle against HIV and AIDS and unemployment (the latter in the context of global capitalism) is providing opportunities to Prophetic Theology. Church Theology does not have the resources to deal with these signs of our times. Those who are infected and those who are unemployed know that this kind of theology is bankrupt. Uncomfortable as it may be for the state, the church, and civil society, Prophetic Theology may be regaining a space and its voice.

literature, and that he must therefore contend for its meaning, appropriating its purported (Church Theology) moral aura.⁴

In his earlier appropriations of the Bible, Mbeki had tended to dispute its contribution. In an address to the 25th Meeting of the Association of African Central Bank Governors (Mbeki 2001), Mbeki begins by tackling “those who are sceptical of our capacity as Africans to overcome our problems of many centuries”. “In other words”, he says a little later, “Africa and Africans are forever condemned to be the hopeless continent and people”. He then immediately cites “the offensive biblical discussion about the children of Ham, Shem and Japhet” in Genesis 9:24-26, which he goes on to cite in full.

²⁴ And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. ²⁵ And he said, Cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. ²⁶ And he said, Blessed *be* the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant (Mbeki 2001:2).

He follows this up with the quotation of Joshua 9:23: “Now therefore, ye are accursed and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God”. He then comments on these texts, saying:

I raise these questions because, as I have said, there are some who are convinced that ours is cursed to remain permanently a hopeless continent.

I mention them also because I assume that before you became central bank governors, you were Africans, whom some claim to be descendants of Ham. I also assume that despite the fact that you are central bank governors, you remain, still, African (Mbeki 2001:2-3).

Clearly Mbeki is contesting racist interpretations of these texts (see also Mbeki 2001), and probably the Bible itself, if we assume (as his speech seems to suggest) that these texts are about race.⁵

There may be a similar questioning of the Bible in and of itself in the May 30 edition of *ANC Today* (Mbeki 2003), which Mbeki begins by referring to the Bible: “In the Biblical Gospel according to St Matthew, it is said that Jesus Christ saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew fishing in the Sea of Galilee. And he said to them: ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers

4 My analysis here makes no attempt to understand Mbeki psychologically or biographically, though such analysis would be interesting.

5 This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the biblical texts, suffice it to say that Mbeki is generally unaware of the kinds of debates within biblical scholarship about such texts.

of men' [Matthew 4:19]". In the next line he goes on to interpret this passage by saying that Perhaps taking a cue from this, some in our country have appointed themselves as 'fishers of corrupt men'. Our governance system is the sea in which they have chosen to exercise their craft. From everything they say, it is clear that they know it as a matter of fact that they are bound to return from their fishing expeditions with huge catches of corrupt men (and women) (Mbeki 2003:1).

The rest of his letter develops this theme, sustaining the 'fishing' metaphor throughout. The thrust of Mbeki's article is clear. He is deeply distressed by those in our country that assume the government is corrupt simply because it is a predominantly (black) African government. He rejects their "highly offensive and deeply entrenched stereotype of Africans" as they seek "to portray Africans as a people that are corrupt, given to telling lies, prone to theft and self-enrichment by immoral means, a people that are otherwise contemptible in the eyes of the 'civilized'" (Mbeki 2003:4). The self-appointed task of these detractors, Mbeki seems to be saying, is to fish for corruption when there is none (or very little). However, while Mbeki's basic argument is clear, his use of Matthew 4:19 is somewhat obscure. He may be using the Matthew text to set up a contrast between the legitimate appointment by Jesus of disciples who will go out and do good to men and women – Mbeki is carefully inclusive in his language – and the illegitimate self-appoint of those who "have appointed themselves" to the task of rooting out imagined corruption. Both sets of people are on a mission, Mbeki may be saying, one legitimate and one not. Or, as has been suggested to me by a colleague, Mbeki may be using the Matthew text more negatively, inferring by his use of this passage that just as religious people are easily taken in by religious propaganda, so too there are those South Africans who are easily taken in by anti-African stereotypes. Or, finally Mbeki may simply be using an image from the Bible that has become separated from and independent of its textual context, in which case there may be little or no connection between Mbeki's use of the image and Matthew's. I will return to the particular topic of corruption below, for Mbeki returns to it in his most extensive appropriations of the Bible, though quite differently.

Mbeki often uses the Bible instrumentally, invoking its aura rather than its substance. So, for example, he is fond of referring to the biblical statement that "those who have ears to hear, let them hear". On one occasion this was to remind those gathered to celebrate the opening of the African National Congress (ANC) archives "about the authentic and real experiences of our own people and their organisations, recorded in the ANC archive" (Mbeki 1996:5). On another occasion he invokes the same expression when he says, in the context of a speech at the opening of the NGO Forum of the World Conference Against Racism, "It may be that

those who, for whatever reason, do not have eyes to see and ears to hear, to borrow a Biblical expression, believe that because racism and sexism are bereft of respectable advocates, they have ceased to exist as social constructs that determine the lives and the future of billions of people” (Mbeki 2001:2). There are many such uses of the Bible in Mbeki’s public discourse, with either direct references or allusions to the Bible as classic literature rather than to a sacred silo that has any special place in our context.

Mbeki has also been quite negative about the Bible, albeit indirectly. Some years ago Mbeki invoked the ire of many South Africans, when he stated quite unambiguously that those who come out of teacher training, “for instance, with Biblical Studies ... are not going to get very many jobs for that” (Mbeki 2004:2). Given that vast number of our people have done Biblical Studies at school, many taking it as far as matric and university (under the apartheid era education system). The discipline of Biblical Studies in our apartheid educational system was an integral part of the Christian National Education systems ideological agenda, and so Mbeki is making a larger point here than simply questioning its market value. But he must have been aware of the displeasure he invoked by making this statement on radio.

However, there are also clear indications of Mbeki’s appropriation of the Bible as an inherently positive text. As early as 1995, while Mbeki was Deputy President, he said that the liberation government’s Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) had “established a unique national consensus on the need for prosperity, democracy, human development and the removal of poverty”. “However”, he goes on to say, “despite its almost biblical character, the RDP Base Document did not provide us with all the answers”. This is because, he continues, “We have always known that its many many priorities and programmes need to be distilled into a series of realistic steps, guided by a long term vision and our resource constraints” (Mbeki 1995:1). While he may be making a rather back-handed affirmation here -- implying that though prophetically visionary the Bible is not really realistic -- Mbeki does seem to view the “biblical character” of the RDP as a positive attribute.

This back-handed appropriation, both recognising and problematising the Bible, is a common feature of his use of the Bible. In a speech to the International Labour Conference in 2003, Mbeki engages with “the Parable of the Talents in the Biblical Gospel according to St Matthew” (Matthew 25:14-30) (Mbeki 2003:1). He quotes the landowner/money merchant in the text at length, having prefaced it by saying that in this text “a money merchant, angry that one of his servants did not discharge his duties as a fund manager, by using the Talent given to him to trade in the money markets”, rebuked him saying:

“Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: ²⁷ Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. ²⁸ Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. ²⁹ For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. ³⁰ And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” [Matthew 25:26-30, King James Version] (Mbeki 2003:1-2).

He then immediately demonstrates that he understands how this parable might be read as a critique of the landowner/money merchant, by saying that “Among the hundreds of millions of the African world from which we came, as we travelled to Europe, the outer darkness into which the money merchant cast his unprofitable servant, there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. Those who do not hear and do not see the agony, have neither ears to hear nor eyes to see” (Mbeki 2003:2). Because Mbeki’s interpretation is not a typical one, though it is fairly common in marginalised communities (Herzog 1994), it is not clear whether he is interpreting what he thinks to be the message of the parable or whether he is reading against what he assumes is a dominant tradition of interpretation. Again, Mbeki’s use of the Bible is a form of problematised appropriation.

This is evident also in an address entitled “Culture: the barrier which blocks regress to beastly ways” (Mbeki 1997). Mbeki, then Deputy President, begins “by citing some words from the Bible [either Matthew 16:26 or Mark 8:36]: ‘For what shall benefit a man if he should gain the whole world and lose his soul?’”⁶ He then goes on to make a joke about needing a “Ministry for the Protection of the Soul”. “After all”, he continues in a jocular vein, “we do have the ministers entrusted with the task of ensuring that we do indeed gain the whole world, through the creation of jobs, building houses, supplying clean water, increasing investor confidence, acquiring corvettes for the navy as well as judges to ensure that the deputy president gets a higher salary!” (Mbeki 1997:1) However, Mbeki seems to argue, such material concerns, though clearly important, must make space for art and culture, which “belong to that form of social existence which both the Bible and William Butler Yeats [in “Sailing to Byzantium”]⁷ describe as the soul -- the spiritual as opposed to the material” and

6 This is one of the few occasions when Mbeki cites a biblical text inexactly; in most of the cases I have analysed he quotes directly and accurately from the King James version, his preferred translation.

7 In juxtaposing Yeats and the Bible, Mbeki is quick to pay (or play) his respects to the Bible, granting it precedence: “I think the Bible meant the same thing that Yeats celebrates in these lines -- or rather, and to avoid the charge of sacrilege -- Yeats understood the Bible meant when it spoke of us standing in danger of

which “constitutes the barrier which blocks your path and mine towards regress to the ways of the beastly world” (Mbeki 1997:2). The task, continues Mbeki a little later, having referred to the work of local and international artists like Dumile Feni, Valente Malangatana, Beethoven, Schiller, and Mqhayi, is that

Above all else we must create the situation in which the soul can sing, and louder sing, to restore a social morality which says the pursuit of material gain at all costs is not and cannot be what distinguishes us as South Africans (Mbeki 1997:3).⁸

Most recently, however, Mbeki seems to deploy the Bible more substantially and less problematically. In his “State of the Nation Address” in February 2006 (Mbeki 2006) Mbeki uses a quotation from the biblical book of Isaiah to frame the address. He quotes the biblical text in English, using the New King James Version (his favoured translation), and then follows immediately by quoting the text again, this time from the Xhosa translation of the Bible. The focus of this speech is his reflection on the state of the nation within the “historic challenge” set before the nation by Nelson Mandela at “the very first Annual Regular Opening of our Democratic Parliament, on 24 May 1994”. Mandela posed the challenge then in the following words, quoted by Mbeki: “we must, constrained by and yet regardless of the accumulated effect of our historical burdens, seize the time to define for ourselves what we want to make of our shared destiny” (Mbeki 2006:2). Mbeki uses these words of Mandela as a regular refrain throughout the speech; and he does similarly with the Isaiah text.

In his usual style, Mbeki draws on a wide range of ‘classical’ literature in this speech, setting up this speech with quotations from Nelson Mandela, then Ingrid Jonker, then Shakespeare, and then the Bible. However, Mandela’s and the Bible’s words are given a larger rhetorical role, providing the speech with its thematic coherence. One of the things that becomes apparent from a close reading of Mbeki’s speeches is how fragile the coherence is. What often holds them together are regular rhetorical repetitions of particular phrases. This feature characterises the cadence of much of Mbeki’s speeches. In this speech Mandela’s and the Bible’s contribution is substantial.

The quotation from Mandela provides the challenge; the quotation from the Bible provides the promise. In his own words Mbeki acknowledges this, saying,

We have known that it would take considerable time before we could say we

losing our souls” (Mbeki 1997:1-2).

8 Mbeki is careful to state that those business people present at his speech “pursue the legitimate task of making profit”.

have eradicated the legacy of the past. We have expected that the circumstances handed down to us by our history would indeed condemn us to a ‘petty pace’ [alluding to the Shakespeare quotation from *Macbeth*] of progress towards the achievement of the goal of a better life for all.

And yet today, as I stand here to speak ... I feel emboldened to appropriate for our people the promise contained in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, when God said:

For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, And instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree ... [Isaiah 55:12-13, New Kings James Version] (Mbeki 2006:3-4).

He then summarises what he is about to elaborate in his speech in the following way, appropriating both Mandela and the Bible:

What has been achieved since Nelson Mandela delivered his first State of the Nation Address, and what we can do, given the larger resources that have since been generated, has surely given hope to the masses of our people, that it is possible for all Africa to hear the mountains and the hills singing before them (Mbeki 2006:4).

As I will argue more fully below, it is no accident that Mbeki invokes the Bible in the same breath as he invokes the masses. Ingrid Jonker and Shakespeare resonate with the few; Mandela and the Bible with the masses.

Mbeki then goes on to argue that despite continuing political violence, especially in KwaZulu-Natal and including the assassination of Chris Hani, both ordinary South Africans and South African business owners “are firmly convinced that our country has entered its Age of Hope” (Mbeki 2006:5). He then immediately links this “Age of Hope” with the promise of the prophet Isaiah, again quoting the extract cited above, introducing the quotation by saying that “Through our National Effort they [the people of South Africa] can see the relevance to our situation of God’s blessings communicated in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: ...” (Mbeki 2006:5).

There are good reasons, continues Mbeki, for this “inspiring perspective about our future shared by the majority of our people” (Mbeki 2006:5), given the many “outstanding achievements” made by these self-same South Africans; achievements made in response,

Mbeki says, “to the call made by Nelson Mandela in 1994 from this podium” (Mbeki 2006:5). Once again the words of Mandela are quoted. Mandela’s words are then invoked again a short while later as Mbeki turns from his analysis of the past to his hopes for the future. The achievements of the struggle against apartheid and the post-apartheid period have ushered in the “Age of Hope”. Now, Mbeki continues, it is the government’s responsibility to “play its role” in giving “new content to our Age of Hope” (Mbeki 2006:6). He then enumerates and elaborates what the government is working on, focussing especially on the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (Mbeki 2006:6-10), social grants, health care, and land reform (Mbeki 2006:10-11).

Having outlined the trajectories of the future, Mbeki draws to a close by stating that “Clearly the masses of our people are convinced that our country has entered into its Age of Hope”. Not only will their country “not disappoint” their expectations,

They are confident that what our country has done to move away from our apartheid past has created the conditions for them to appropriate God’s blessing to the Prophet Isaiah:

For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands [Isaiah 55:12, New Kings James Version].

“It is up to us”, he concludes,

through our National Effort, to build a winning nation, to do all the things that will ensure that the mountains and the hills of our country break forth into singing before all our people, and all the trees of the field clap their hands to applaud the people’s season of joy. Thank you (Mbeki 2006:13).

Absent here is any backhandedness. The Bible has taken centre-stage with Mandela, offering a vision that can be embraced by all South Africans, even the masses. In my final example of Mbeki’s use of the Bible in the public realm, his presentation at the 4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture (Mbeki 2006), he retains this affirmative appropriation of the Bible. Indeed, instead of relatively brief allusions and citations or the quotation of single texts, in this case there is sustained engagement with the Bible. So much so that he felt the need to point out in the oral presentation of the lecture (though it is not included in the published version) that his extensive reference to the Bible did not mean that he was “about to become a priest” (to which this audience responded with laughter) (Mbeki 2006). Embarrassed by religion before his immediate audience of the educated, somewhat liberal, elite, Mbeki nevertheless continues to use the Bible, mindful of the masses watching television or

listening to the radio as he engages with their favoured silo.

He begins by invoking the masses, saying, “I believe I know this as a matter of fact, that the great masses of our country everyday pray that the new South Africa that is being born will be a good, a moral, a humane and a caring South Africa which as it matures will progressively guarantee the happiness of all its citizens”. For this to happen, Mbeki continues, we must “infuse the values of Ubuntu into our very being as a people” (Mbeki 2006:1).

“But what”, he goes on to ask, “is it that constitutes Ubuntu beyond the standard and yet correct rendition ‘Motho ke motho ka motho yo mongoe: Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’?! [A person is a person because of other people]” Remarkably,⁹ he then turns, immediately, to the Bible, beginning a detailed exposition of Proverbs:

The Book of Proverbs in the Holy Bible contains some injunctions that capture a number of elements of what I believe constitute important features of the Spirit of Ubuntu, which we should strive to implant in the very bosom of the new South Africa that is being born, the food of the soul that would inspire all our people to say that they are proud to be South African!¹⁰

The Proverbs say: [Proverbs 3:27-31] Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it. ²⁸ Say not unto thy neighbour, Go, and come again, and to morrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee. ²⁹ Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee. ³⁰ Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm. ³¹ Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways (Mbeki 2006:1-2).¹¹

Having quoted the text at length, he then goes on to appropriate it at length, along the line that “The Book of Proverbs assumes that as human beings, we have the human capacity to do as it says” (Mbeki 2006:2). After an extended exposition of this text, he then quotes from Shakespeare’s Richard III, before returning again to Proverbs 3, quoting verse 30. Shakespeare’s Richard III provides Mbeki with “an open proclamation of evil intent” by the Duke of Gloucester (Mbeki 2006:2-3), which he then contrasts with the call of Proverbs to do good. By juxtaposing these texts Mbeki makes the point that “the intention to do good,

9 Again, Mbeki gives precedence to the Bible, granting it the prerogative to interpret ubuntu.

10 Here there is an echo of Mofokeng!

11 I have inserted verse numbers for reference sake; Mbeki’s version is from the King James Version (which clearly appeals to his ‘classical’ ear), as above, but does not include the chapter and verse references.

however noble in its purposes, does not guarantee that such good will be done”. Nevertheless, he continues, the presence of “many Richard’s” in our midst, should not mean that we should “avoid setting ourselves the goal [set by the Bible] to do good!” (Mbeki 2006:3) What is needed, therefore, says Mbeki, is what Nelson Mandela called the need for an “RDP of the soul” (Mbeki 2006:3).

Mbeki admits that the RDP “was eminently about changing the material conditions of the lives of our people”, and that “It made no reference to matters of the soul, except indirectly” (Mbeki 2006:3). He then assures his audience, quoting extracts from the original RDP document, that its concerns “were and remain critically important and eminently correct objectives that we must continue to pursue” (Mbeki 2006:3). However, he goes on to argue that the RDP’s intention to improve the human condition implies a spiritual dimension. Human fulfilment, he says, consists of more than the access to “modern and effective services” promised by the RDP.¹² “As distinct from other species of the animal world, human beings also have spiritual needs”; thus, he continues, “all of us and not merely the religious leaders speak of the intangible element that is immanent in all human beings -- the soul!” What is more, he adds, “all human societies also have a soul!” (Mbeki 2006:4)

He then returns to the contrast between Proverbs and Richard III, and argues that “the construction of a humane and caring society ... entails a struggle rather than any self-evident and inevitable victory of good over evil” (Mbeki 2006:4). As in many of his speeches, Mbeki’s rhetoric often exceeds the logic of his argument; but it is reasonably clear that what Mbeki is arguing here is that a substantial part of what we must do to succeed in our purpose of bringing about the good is to participate, both as individuals and as a society, in the RDP of the soul.

In the next part of his speech he elaborates on what the nation needs to do “to accomplish the RDP of its soul” (Mbeki 2006:5). The background of the struggle facing us, Mbeki argues, is racial capitalism and its “well-entrenched value system that placed individual acquisition of wealth at the very centre of the value system of our society as a whole” (Mbeki 2006:6). Such a value system also “assumed a tolerant or permissive attitude towards such crimes as theft and corruption” (Mbeki 2006:6). The next few pages of his speech elaborate on how the

12 Mbeki returns here to the “almost biblical” character of the Reconstruction and Development Programme, citing some of its tenets. A sub-text of Mbeki’s invocation of the RDP is, I think, his response to the critique levelled at the ANC by the South African Communist Party, as argued in the May 2006, Special Edition of *Bua Komanisi*: Information Bulletin of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party (SACP 2006). This incisive analysis considers in depth the ANC’s betrayal of the socialist vision of the RDP in favour of its neo-capitalist replacement project, GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution).

capitalist system displaced the values of human solidarity with the values of individual profit maximisation (Mbeki 2006:6-8). This value system, Mbeki asserts, is what we have been “inherited” (Mbeki 2006:6), resulting in a society today in which for many “personal success and fulfilment means personal enrichment and striking public display of that wealth” (Mbeki 2006:8).

Such values and attitudes “cannot but negate social cohesion and mutually beneficial human solidarity”, and bring about “the destruction of human society”. But, continues Mbeki, we must defeat “the tendency in our society towards the deification of personal wealth as the distinguishing feature of the new citizen of the new South Africa” (Mbeki 2006:9).

As he develops his argument for an RDP of the soul, Mbeki, now mid-way through his speech, returns again to Proverbs, this time to Proverbs 6:6. The literary context in which he quotes the latter is worth indicating at some length:

With some trepidation, advisedly assuming that there is the allotted proportion of hardened cynics present here this evening,¹³ I will nevertheless make bold to quote an ancient text which reads, in Old English:

[Proverbs 6:6-11] Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: ⁷ Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, ⁸ Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. ⁹ How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? ¹⁰ Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: ¹¹ So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

I know that given the level of education of our audience this evening,¹⁴ the overwhelming majority among us will know that I have extracted the passages I have quoted from the Book of Proverbs contained in the St James’ edition of the Holy Bible.

It may be that the scepticism of our age has dulled our collective and individual sensitivity to the messages of this Book of Faith and all the messages that it seeks to convey to us.

13 Mbeki seems acutely aware of his two audiences and of their rather different attitudes to the Bible.

14 Mbeki recognises that his immediate educated audience would recognise his biblical allusions/quotations, even though (as he has implied earlier) they may not take the Bible seriously. Beyond this immediate audience, I am arguing, is another larger less educated audience who would not only recognise but also ‘believe’ the Bible.

In this regard, I know that I have not served the purposes of this Book well, by exploiting the possibility it provides to say to you and everybody else who might be listening, “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise” (Mbeki 2006:10).

This is a truly remarkable shift from Mbeki’s earlier back-handed appropriations of the Bible. He not only engages with the text in detail, he distances himself from the educated, elitist, liberal, and sceptical attitudes that may dismiss his references to the Bible. He even deprecates his own grasp of the text. Though there is some coyness, embarrassment, and humour here, as is evident in the oral presentation, Mbeki is also deeply serious.

He realises that citing “from the Book of Proverbs will, at best, evoke literary interest and at worst a minor theological controversy”, but his “own view is that the Proverbs raise important issues that bear on what our nation is trying to do to define the soul of the new South Africa” (Mbeki 2006:10).

I believe they communicate a challenging message about how we should respond to the situation immanent in our society concerning the adulation of personal wealth and the attendant tendency to pay little practical regard to what each one of us might do to assist our neighbour to achieve the goal of a better life (Mbeki 2006:10).

Mbeki invokes the hardworking and communal ant of Proverbs in order to argue that the nation “must develop the wisdom that will ensure the survival and cohesion of human society” (Mbeki 2006:10).

He realises that “many among us might very well think” that he is indulging in wishful thinking in “trying to wish away the waves of self-aggrandisement that might be characteristic of global human society” (Mbeki 2006:10), so he strengthens his argument -- by quoting another biblical text. The text he chooses is from the book of Genesis, and again he states explicitly that he is quoting from “the Holy Bible”. The Genesis text he quotes is 3:19, and on this occasion the reference is given:

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19) (Mbeki 2006:10).

“This biblical text suggests”, argues Mbeki, “that of critical importance to every South African is consideration of the material conditions of life and therefore the attendant pursuit of personal wealth” (Mbeki 2006:11). The point he seems to be making here, though again

the logic is not that clear, is that immediate material means are important, perhaps even foundational. He supports this biblical claim by a fairly extensive appropriation of the materialist philosophy of Friederich Engels, Karl Marx, and Vladimir Lenin, citing from their work.¹⁵ However, he then immediately juxtaposes ‘materialism’ with ‘idealism’ in order to make the related point that materialist concerns cannot be allowed to be our only concerns. “In the context of our own challenges, this ‘idealism’ must serve to focus our attention on issues other than the tasks of the production and distribution of material wealth” (Mbeki 2006:11).

What Mbeki does through this intertextual exchange is to inaugurate a discussion of the relationship between materialism and idealism. This discussion is not that easy to follow, but he seems to be saying that though Marx and the Genesis text are legitimately concerned about material considerations, we must not abandon aspects of idealism, which, as we might now suspect, he also finds in the Bible, this time citing John’s gospel: “[John 1:1] In the beginning was the Word” (Mbeki 2006:12). Our preoccupation, Mbeki seems to be arguing, has been with Marx’s “Man must eat before he can think!”, whereas we should also be considering Rene Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” (Mbeki 2006:11). The Bible is useful in exploring this tension because it acknowledges the need for both bread and soul, body and mind/Word.

Mbeki interrupts his argument at this stage in his speech to deal overtly with his prolific use of the Bible: “I am certain that many in this auditorium have been asking themselves the question why I have referred so insistently on the Christian Holy Scriptures. Let me explain” (Mbeki 2006:12).¹⁶ The crux of his explanation is that in the context of our country’s daily economic deliberations, the debate itself “must tell us that human life is about more than the economy and therefore material considerations”. This is important, Mbeki continues, because

I believe that as a nation we must make a special effort to understand and act on this because of what I have said already, that personal pursuit of material gain, as the beginning and end of life purpose, is already beginning to corrode our social and national cohesion.

What this means, Mbeki goes on to state, is “that when we talk of a better life for all, within the context of a shared sense of national unity and national reconciliation, we must look

15 As I have already said, Mbeki regularly appropriates Marxist rhetoric. In his more recent appropriations, including this instance, the appropriation is ambivalent. Rhetorically, he shows he knows his Marx, but he also indicates that ideologically he is not fully persuaded.

16 As indicated above, it is at this point that Mbeki makes an aside, saying, “Do not worry, I am not about to become a priest” (Mbeki 2006).

beyond the undoubtedly correct economic objectives our nation has set itself” (Mbeki 2006:12). It is not the government’s neo-liberal capitalist macro-economic policy, Mbeki is arguing, that is to blame for the personal pursuit of material gain. It is some moral failing that requires an RDP of the soul. The RDP as a macro-economic policy has been completely replaced by an RDP of the soul.¹⁷ And, of course, in Mbeki’s mind the Bible has plenty to say about the latter (though not about the former).

The speech now makes a somewhat abrupt digression from South African concerns to the situation in the Middle East, though he hangs on to his economic thread, implying that the crisis in the Middle East is economically induced (Mbeki 2006:12). Drawing on the poetry of William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”, Mbeki appeals to his audience not to allow a “monstrous beast” to be born from South Africa’s new Jerusalem (Mbeki 2006:13). He continues, alluding perhaps to the novel by Chinua Achebe (Achebe 1958), by saying “that for us to ensure that things do not fall apart, we must in the first instance, never allow that the market should be the principal determinant of the nature of our society” (Mbeki 2006:14). Instead of placing the market at the centre, a centre which cannot hold, we must place social cohesion and human solidarity, in a word, ubuntu (Mbeki 2006:14).

Continuing his critique of the market, but without saying anything about the place of the market in his government’s macro-economic policy, Mbeki returns to the Bible as a resource for resisting “the demons that W.B. Yeats saw slouching towards Bethlehem to be born”:

We must therefore say that the Biblical injunction is surely correct, that “Man cannot live by bread alone” [Matthew 4:4/Luke 4:4] and therefore that the mere pursuit of individual wealth can never satisfy the need immanent in all human beings to lead lives of happiness (Mbeki 2006:14).

This is Mbeki’s final reference to the Bible. He shifts his attention in the final few pages of his speech to emphasising our need for a “cohesive human society” (Mbeki 2006:15), praising our nation’s gains and the dangers that persist from our past. But we are fortunate, he concludes, because “we had a Nelson Mandela who made bold to give us the task to attend to the ‘RDP of the soul’” (Mbeki 2006:16).

Back to a public Bible

In all of these examples, and my selection is representative and substantive though not

¹⁷ The process of this shift reaches its culmination in Section 7 of the African National Congress’ “Policy Discussion Documents”, a document dealing with “RDP of the soul” (Congress 2007).

exhaustive, there are common concerns, but also some subtle shifts. Mbeki remains concerned about the African soul, but we can discern a shift from a soul that includes a socio-cultural breadth to a narrower Church-Theology-type moral soul. We see too, I suggest, a growing awareness in Mbeki that he is addressing at least two audiences, a small well-educated vaguely liberal elite who are somewhat embarrassed by religion (as is Mbeki himself) and a large less-educated mass of religious believers, most of whom are Christians.¹⁸ Mbeki wants to address them both, and the Bible lends itself to this task.¹⁹ It remains classic literature, even for the post-religious postcolonial educated elite. And it resonates with the believing religious masses, for it remains a favoured silo.

I have dealt with Mbeki's appropriation of the Bible at some length, for it is instructive for our current moment. Clearly the Bible is in the public realm. But how is it being used? Is Mbeki's use of it simply politically instrumentalist, or is it a substantive manifestation of Church Theology? His allusions to the Bible are certainly often instrumentalist, and his call for an RDP of the soul sounds like Church Theology, but his use of Matthew 25:14-30 is also more complex and nuanced, indicating prophetic impulses. However we understand his use of the Bible, what is clear is that Mbeki has increasingly engaged with it, publically.

Is Mbeki here practising what Cedric Mayson, long time liberation theologian and now National Coordinator of the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, has advocated? In an occasional document circulated for discussion among colleagues (including myself), Mayson canvasses for "Liberating religion" (Mayson 2005). Like me, he notes the demise of any serious theology since *The Kairos Document* and he laments the failure of religious leaders in taking up Nelson Mandela's initiative "to discover an inter-faith theology of transformation". He then offers an incisive analysis of the tendency of institutionalised religion, whatever its form (including African Traditional Religion) to usurp the "prophets of peace and harmony, service and compassion" in whose memory they were established. Our current moment, Mayson argues, calls for "Secular Spirituality" (and the upper case is his).

We need to liberate religion into a new secular spirituality [lower case this

18 In his "Letter from the President" in a recent *ANC Today*, Mbeki acknowledges that the "overwhelming majority of our people are Christians" (Mbeki 2007:2).

19 Having made this argument, I eagerly listened to and then read Mbeki's recent State of the Nation address (Mbeki 2007), only to find no reference at all to the Bible. My initial disappointment was allayed somewhat when I found no classical allusions whatsoever. My initial reflections were then given articulation by Rapule Tabane in an article in the *Mail & Guardian* weekly newspaper (Tabane 2007), when he said "Mbeki did not seem to have written the speech himself". Like me, he lamented that "for all of the realism of his speech [in listing what the government would do to combat crime], it lacked soul". "We lost a poet, but gained a pragmatist", Tabane goes on to say. Mbeki's heart (to shift the metaphor somewhat) was not in this speech; he, says Tabane, "was bludgeoned into making the right noises about crime".

time] which drives away superstition and fear, and empowers millions of agnostics and believers who are seeking a spirituality not wrapped in colonial religions. It means a new evangelism, a unity in diversity of people seeking values which change society, a new prophetic context which sees politics and economics as godly spheres.²⁰

While Mbeki is almost certainly sympathetic to Mayson's project, he clearly recognises that he cannot engage with his public unless he also engages substantially with their key texts, which include the Bible. I concur with Mbeki on this point, though I would want to read the Bible more prophetically than he does, using it to question his (and our state's) position on economic policy and HIV and AIDS, in particular. I also have sympathy for Mayson's perspective, especially interreligious collaborative projects, but I worry about us abandoning the established religions and particularly the Bible.²¹ For what our the decade after liberation has made abundantly clear, as I have argued, is that Church Theology (and similar theological forms in other religious traditions, including African (Traditional) Religion) will coopt whatever we do not claim and contend for.

I can see why the prophetic sector in our society has exchanged the Bible for the Constitution. However, though the Constitution is a worthy document with which to take forward progressive projects, separating it from the Bible is counterproductive (contra Plaatjie 2001). While the Bible remains a substantive silo, an ideological and spiritual resource for the masses, it must be publically contested.

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²⁰ Mayson discusses this more fully in (Mayson 2006).

²¹ In response these comments of mine, Mayson said that according to his understanding "the Bible is essentially about secular spirituality, not the religious spirituality usually propounded by the religious institutions" (personal communication). Mayson may, therefore, approve of Mbeki's public but non-ecclesial engagement with the Bible.

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